

Social Tourism Benefits for Seniors

Zorana Medarić

University of Primorska, Faculty of Tourism Studies – Turistica, Slovenia
zorana.medaric@fts.upr.si

Janja Gabruč

University of Primorska, Faculty of Tourism Studies – Turistica, Slovenia
janja.gabruc@fts.upr.si

Mateja Sedmak

University of Primorska, Science and Research Centre, Slovenia
mateja.sedmak@zrs.upr.si

Introduction

Contemporary literature on social tourism widely recognizes the important role of social tourism and the benefits it has in terms of social inclusion and quality of life, and other social benefits that it brings to individuals and society as a whole (Minnaert, Maitland, & Miller, 2013; Minnaert & Schapmans, 2009; McCabe, 2009; Gabruč, 2015).

McCabe's study (2009), for example, emphasizes four important reasons for the family holiday such as: (1) spending time together as a family; (2) time away from daily life and circumstances; (3) recovering from ill-health and bereavement; and (4) visiting new places and enjoying new activities. The study 'Understanding the benefits of social tourism: linking participation to subjective well-being and quality of life' conducted by McCabe, Joldersma, and Li (2013) indicates similar results, underscoring that holidays have a positive effect on the emotional state of respondents. Sedgley, Pritchard, and Morgan (2012) emphasize that children and families living in poverty are excluded from holidaying and consequently excluded from the quality-of-life and well-being benefits that a holiday can offer. The benefits of holidaying reported in their study are often connected with opportunities in terms of family bonding and spending quality time with their children, enhancing both the adults' and children's well-being. The study also reveals other benefits, such as improved self-esteem and confidence, and opportunities to develop new skills and widen perspectives. On

the relationship between tourism and quality of life and subjective well-being, McCabe and Johnson (2013) indicate that tourism contributes to the social tourist's well-being, confirming studies which have found that tourism contributes to improvements in quality of life. The findings also suggest that 'holidays offer more value than simply short-term, hedonistic experiences, but can contribute to the long-term, broader aspects of life satisfaction and positive functioning' (McCabe & Johnson, 2013, p. 60). Holidays have a high level of impact in relation to happiness and optimism, family life and relationships.

Studies on social tourism have mostly concentrated on the benefits for children and young families, yet few analyses have investigated its value for the wellbeing of disadvantaged older people. According to the recent study of Morgan, Pritchard and Sedgley (2015) that explores the links between wellbeing and social tourism opportunities for older people, social tourism has an important impact on their wellbeing in psychological, physiological as well as spiritual senses. Through social tourism, older people may find new companionship; it also represents a getaway from everyday routines as well as rest and an opportunity for reminiscence or renegotiating self-identity.

Thus, the focus of this study was to analyse the main benefits social tourism brings for older people in Slovenia, as perceived by the stakeholders involved in social tourism for seniors. This paper presents the preliminary results of the ongoing (October 2015–

September 2017) project Identification, Classification, and Potential of Development of Social Tourism Products in Slovenia, with an Emphasis on Programs for Seniors¹ with the aims of analysing the situation in the emerging field of social tourism in Slovenia; researching the developmental needs and potentials in the field of development of social tourism products, and developing the guidelines for systemic measures in this field. We present the result of qualitative research (half-structured interviews)² among different actors dealing with social tourism for the elderly in Slovenia. We interviewed representatives of various institutions that deal with various groups of senior beneficiaries:

1. *Older people with low socio-economic status* who would not be able to afford holidays and are thus involved in humanitarian programs, such as Red Cross programs with the aim of positive impact on health;
2. *Elderly people who need specific infrastructural adjustments*, such as those with disabilities, who use facilities and services tailored to their needs (e.g. vacation facilities of the Slovenian Paraplegic Associations);
3. *Seniors as one of the target groups of tourists* for whom special programs are designed and adjusted in terms of price, payment terms, content, animation (e.g. Travel agency Relax in cooperation with pensioners' associations)

¹ The project is run by the Faculty of Tourism Studies at the University of Primorska in cooperation with the Science and Research Centre of the University of Primorska and Faculty of Design, and financed by the Slovenian Research Agency and the Ministry of Economic Development and Technology.

² Interviews were conducted with: representative of the Slovenian Red Cross, representative of the institute and travel agency Premiki, representative of Hospitality and Tourism Union, representative of Slovenian Federation of Pensioners' Associations, representative of Pensioners' Association Škofja Loka, representative of Pensioners' Association Semedela, representative of Hotel Delfin, representative of tourist agency Relax and representative of the Slovenian Paraplegic Association.

4. *Seniors as only one of groups of tourists* – there are no special adjustments for them (e.g. vacation facilities of Hospitality and Tourism Union).

Within this research, we focused on various topics, such as their views on the development of social tourism programs and the research of existing social tourism programs in Slovenia, beneficiaries, the extent, and duration of programs, organization and financing of programs as well as the benefits for seniors.

Regardless of the group involved, the benefits of holidays for the elderly, as recognized by the stakeholders, are various and can generally be grouped into three clusters: (1) sociability and social inclusion; (2) health and (3) education and horizon broadening. These aspects are also interconnected and difficult to separate.

Sociability

As recognized by previous studies, tourism programs offer opportunities for social interaction (Hazel, 2005; Minnaert, Maitland, & Miller, 2009; McCabe et al., 2010). Sociability and social interaction of older people directly address the loneliness and isolation which is a major issue for many of them (Morgan et al., 2015) and have a positive impact on their wellbeing: it is beneficial for elderly to be able to extend their social worlds and to have opportunity for increased social interaction and companionship that holidays provide. This aspect was also recognized as an essential element of social inclusion for senior beneficiaries of social tourism within our study.

The representative of the Slovenian Red Cross stresses the importance of social contacts among older tourists:

In these holidays, team spirit is also important, socializing, encouraging each other, this positive motivation that older people share with each other.

The tourist agency Relax has special target programs for senior tourists, having recognized the importance for socializing for older tourists; therefore, they also regularly adapt their programs to include as much socializing as possible:

[...] this means that we listen to them and prepare the programs [...] from the price point of view as well as regard to the organization of guided activities. They like to go on trips, but above all, they like to socialize in the evenings. There are many guests from all parts of Slovenia who actually met in our Senior clubs and then all kinds of bonds developed.

Similarly, the representative of the Pensioners' Association Škofja Loka highlights the benefits of sociability and the importance of organizing the tourist trip so as to give them many opportunities for interactions:

Benefits? I think that this [travel programs] is necessary. People should also have their time: to take care of themselves, to get together with their peers, to socialize, to exchange everyday matters between each other, to converse. They also establish various friendships in this way. This is also beneficial. They don't think about their illnesses. We always make sure that there is a lot happening on these holidays; it means that we organize sports, hiking activities during the holidays. [...] The more we socialize, the more we can understand each other.

Health

Research on the relationship between participation in tourism and self-perceived health as well as the functional capacity of elderly people, shows there is a major positive connection between them. In this context, the participation of elderly in tourism can be a part of social and health policy due to its ability to reduce public spending on social care and healthcare (Ferrer, Ferri Sanz, Durá Ferrandis, McCabe, & Sánchez García, 2015). The benefit of tourism activities for elderly on their health has also been recognized by our interviewees. The Red Cross representative sees holidays for the elderly as an important preventive health measure:

And it is the fact that these holidays in seaside resorts, particularly on Debeli Rtič where there are two recognized natural healing resources: its

microclimate and the sea water, have an important impact on the health of the elderly. [...] The purpose (of their programs) is always to have a positive influence on health, these preventive measures.

Furthermore, holidays have been recognized as an integral part of active aging (representative of Slovenian Federation of Pensioners' Associations):

For [pensioners] to have a possibility to go on holidays, to change the environment, to socialize [...] This is why the elderly go to spas [...] to maintain a level of fitness and health, to stay active, to have hobbies [...] This means active and healthy aging.

Social tourism programs for the elderly have benefits for their well-being (Red Cross representative):

And the assistance we offer in the context of social tourism for seniors is particularly in the fact that they can come to the sea, change the environment and relax here, to experience programs offered by our health resort, particularly for them. And this certainly has good effects for their health.

Moreover, the beneficial role of well-being of retirees for society as a whole has also been stressed (representative of Pensioners' Association Semedela):

[...] certainly such health maintenance is positive in general for the whole society. Because a vital, happy pensioner, who socializes [...] is certainly more useful [...] and it is already one of the social benefits [...] that people are satisfied. Satisfaction. That's a lot.

And (Hospitality and Tourism Union representative):

[...] in my opinion, this is a good concept for the whole society. Health, well-being, integration.

Horizon Broadening

Social tourism can have a wide arrange of positive effects, among which are new knowledge, meeting new people, new places, changing perspectives, broadening of experiences, and other factors 'Social tourism is thus not only a widening of geographical horizons, but can also widen mental and psychological horizons' (Minnaert & Schapmans, 2009, p. 60). We summarized the above mentioned under the term 'horizon broadening.' Horizon broadening could also be linked to experimental learning (Minnaert et al., 2009, p. 321); holidays with opportunities to explore new environments and engage in new activities, meet new people and be faced with unexpected problems, can start an experimental learning cycle which can improve holiday makers skills and affect their views, attitudes, and behaviors (for example self-esteem). The possibility for the elderly to be involved in tourism, to go on holidays, to experience new things certainly represents an added value in their life (Hospitality and Tourism Union representative):

The horizons are widening, life can be more beautiful [...] For you to go somewhere, not only to have a rest, but to have an active rest. [...] But these walks around the island, visiting new destinations, trying new things. All this, in my opinion, enriches [us]. And this is a kind of third tourist university.

If they have the possibility, the elderly like to explore and learn about new things and holidays offer these opportunities (representative of Pensioners' Association Škofja Loka):

Yes, I would say that retirees, we are still very curious, we want to see many things. In fact, there comes a period of life that we still want to learn about many things, get to know them.

And (Hospitality and Tourism Union representative):

[...] and we know these are benefits [going on a holiday], that this enriches us, the elderly, with knowledge and understanding.

Conclusion

The findings of this qualitative study support previous studies on the benefits of social tourism. Holidays can have positive effects on various aspects of the life of seniors, as confirmed through our research. Slovenian stakeholders involved in different social tourism initiatives involving seniors have recognized its positive impacts. Since in addition to other social and economic benefits, social tourism programmes can present a major form of social intervention diminishing cost for social care and healthcare (Minnaert & Schapmans, 2009), it would be significant that these initiatives would be also recognized systematically by the Slovenian government as well as policy makers and join existing European social tourism programmes. Finally, more systematic development and regulation of social tourism for seniors in Slovenia also ought to be one of the national priorities due to on-going social changes: the aging society and an increasing number of seniors.

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